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SUBJECT: MALTA: "CHANGE" CANDIDATE ELECTED AS LEADER OF
OPPOSITION LABOR PARTY

REF: VALLETTA 097

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The opposition Malta Labor Party (MLP) has a new leader: Joseph Muscat, who for the past several years has represented Malta in the European Parliament. At 34 Muscat is the youngest candidate to contest the post, and ran on a campaign of change and a promise to strengthen and unite the party. However, a week after Muscat took the helm of the party, two MLP veterans were elected to deputy leadership positions, suggesting that the MLP is not completely ready for sweeping changes. Anglu Farrugia has been elected Deputy Leader for Parliamentary Affairs, and Toni Abela will be Deputy Leader for Party Affairs. End summary.

¶2. (U) On June 6, in a run-off for the leadership of the Malta Labor Party, Joseph Muscat garnered 65% of the votes for new party leader. Muscat's victory came as no surprise, as his candidacy for the post had been blessed by former MLP leader Alfred Sant, who resigned the leadership after the MLP's third consecutive defeat in the March general elections. Among the party delegates, who were the only voters in the leadership contest, Sant's opinion still carries considerable weight. Sant's influence over the process was evident in the first round of voting on June 5, when Muscat fell just short of the 50% threshold to be elected without a run-off, even with 5 candidates in the race.

¶3. (U) Though the MLP suffered only the narrowest of defeats in the March elections (reftel), many thought the MLP needed new direction and a fresh face. Muscat promised change when he threw his hat into the ring for the leadership position, calling for change and unity in the Party, and stating that &while embracing free trade and encouraging the entrepreneurial spirit, we have to reaffirm that which defines us: our social compassion." He added that "the helping hand of government should be ever present" and that "our common challenges should be the pursuit for full employment and the creation of a knowledge society.⁸ Within days of his assuming leadership, Muscat met with Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi; the two men embraced and agreed that it was important for Labor and the Nationalist Party &to work together for the common good of the country.⁸ Muscat elaborated that his brand of politics was to &confront ideas without antagonism" and to not hesitate to "agree (with the government) on issues we believe in.⁸

¶4. (U) Muscat did not run in the March 2008 general elections and does not have a seat in Parliament. When Parliament convenes in September, a yet-to-be-determined MLP parliamentarian will resign, allowing Muscat to be "co-opted" into the empty seat. Until that time, MP Charles Mangion, the previous Deputy Leader for Parliamentary Affairs, will officially be the Labor leader.

BIOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND ON THE NEW LEADERSHIP:

15. (U) Muscat was elected to the European Parliament in 2004, garnering the most votes of the Labor candidates, which won three of Malta's five seats in the European Parliament. The MLP Members of European Parliament (MEP) form part of the Socialist Group. He is the Vice-Chairman of the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs as well as the Delegation for relations with Belarus. At 34 years old, Muscat is the second-youngest person to hold the leadership of Malta's Labor Party, the youngest was Dom Mintoff, who ruled the MLP from 1949-1984.

16. (U) Anglu Farrugia was elected to be Deputy Leader for Parliamentary Affairs on June 13 with 65% of the delegates, votes. He is a MLP veteran) in 2003 he unsuccessfully contested for the party leadership against Sant; and in 1998, unsuccessfully contested for the position of deputy leader for party affairs. Farrugia entered parliament in 1996, when Labor was in the majority. He has never held a ministerial post, though he has served as the Shadow Spokesman for Justice and Home Affairs. Prior to entering parliament, Farrugia worked as a police superintendent and then qualified to practice as a lawyer. Farrugia was nominated by Embassy Valletta to attend a seminar at the Marshall Center in August 2007.

17. (U) Toni Abela was elected as the Deputy Leader for Party Affairs with more than 60% of the vote. Abela qualifies as another MLP veteran. At the age of 29, he held the post of party president. In the 1980s after he was ex-communicated from the Labor Party for criticizing its administration, he co-founded the Green Party with Harry Vassallo (leader of the

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Green Party until 2008). While Abela is not a parliamentarian, he used this to his advantage to reassure the delegates that he would dedicate himself to reforming the party's administration.

Comment

18. (SBU) As Muscat spends the majority of his time in Brussels, the Embassy has had minimal direct communication with him. Ambassador is scheduled to meet with him at the MLP headquarters on July 7; all indications are that Muscat intends to maintain the open and largely friendly channels of communication that prevailed with Sant. The foreign policy direction of the MLP under Muscat's leadership is not yet clear, and he has yet to appoint a new slate of MLP parliamentarians for the Foreign and European Affairs Committee. On certain social issues -- most notably divorce, previously an untouchable for both parties -- Muscat has said it should be part of the agenda for debate and discussion, leaving some hope that he may be more open to new ideas than his NAM-flavored, anti-US Navy ship visit rhetoric would suggest.

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